

Strategy & Tactics in the New Anti-War Movement

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One year after the carefully orchestrated post-911 bi-partisan "war on terrorism," the murderous war against the people of Afghanistan and the associated crackdown on democratic rights and civil liberties, a burgeoning mass movement in opposition to U.S. war and intervention has forced its way onto the stage of real politics.

Every organization, socialist and otherwise, serious about stopping the impending second U.S. slaughter in Iraq and opposing U.S. intervention more generally, is engaged in critical discussion and debate about the future course of the antiwar movement.

Questions that have not been discussed for a decade and longer are coming to the fore, a good sign that the strength of the movement

and its capacity to involve ever-increasing numbers to challenge the war-makers is on the rise. What demands this new movement should put forward and what organizational forms it should take are the central questions to be answered.

The outcome of these discussions will eventually determine the future course of the struggle against imperialist war. They will determine whether the new movement can reach the maturity necessary to forge a broad unity, reach agreement on principled political demands, and construct united front-type organizational forms through which the full power of the movement can be brought to bear.

The period ahead will test all those who

have already played important roles in the initial demonstrations and those who are preparing to enter the fray. It will decide whether the future movement is to be inclusive, broadly democratic and capable of winning, or exclusive-that is, limited and controlled by narrow forces that insist on organizational control at the expense of the movement itself. This article is a contribution to the present discussion.

The context

The new McCarthyism, pressed forward in the name of alleged national security threats posed by unknown terrorists, has failed to find fertile ground on U.S. soil. Dissent is on the rise as wary working people see corporate greed, theft, and business failures looting their pensions and slashing jobs - while elections are stolen and government-sanctioned racism is practiced with impunity.

Civil liberties, long taken for granted, are written out of existence. Billions are spent on wars against defenseless poor people whose rulers were installed by the U.S. imperial power, only to be removed when the price of cheap oil requires another bloodbath.

The ruling rich have budgeted an unprecedented \$360 billion for war and additional billions for "Homeland Security." They have rewritten the Constitution in order to arrest without charges thousands of immigrants, based solely on their nationality or religion. They have passed witch-hunt laws aimed at launching spy operations on everyone who rises to challenge the status quo.

And in the name of a budget surplus that disappeared overnight, they gifted \$1.3 trillion to bail out their friends in ugly corporate America, where corruption of every variety has proven to be routine.

The year has truly been a whirlwind of antiwar activity, marked by tens of thousands of people in this country breaking with the historic pro-Zionist consensus and standing in solidarity with oppressed, brutalized, and excluded Palestinians who are daily ground into the earth with Washington's approval and with Washington's weapons of mass destruction.

We are witness to the exercise of counter-power by West Coast longshore workers, supported by the entire labor movement, in a confrontation for jobs and union rights that may represent a turning point for the entire labor movement. Aware of the dangers, the boss class has invoked the "national security" bugaboo and employed the reactionary Taft Hartley law to cool the struggle for the moment while threatening to militarize West Coast docks with scab troops to challenge union power.

We have seen Teamsters Local 705 in Chicago, the second largest Teamsters local nationally, resolve that American workers have no quarrel with their brothers and sisters in Iraq. National, state and regional trade union organizations, central labor councils and union locals that in past decades lagged behind the initial wave of youthful activists who formed the base of past antiwar efforts, have openly opposed war on Iraq.

From the Vietnam era, through the decade of mobilizations against U.S. intervention in Central America, to the short-lived but massive actions against the Gulf War in 1991, important lessons were learned-and unfortunately, in part forgotten.

The almost unexpected success of the actions against a U.S. war in Iraq this October stunned even the closest observers. They open the door wide to a necessary discussion of how to build the broadest and most powerful united movement against the impending imperialist slaughter in Iraq.

They pose to all who see imperialist war as central to world politics the possibility of stopping this war and the future wars for profit and conquest contemplated by an economically wounded U.S. ruling class, driven in its decline to seek new advantage over its imperialist competitors.

The Oct. 6 antiwar actions initiated by the Not In Our Name: Pledge of Resistance (NION) group mobilized some 30,000 or more people in Manhattan, 8000 in San Francisco, and 5000 in Los Angeles as well as tens of thousands in other cities where the date was taken up by a diverse range of newly-formed organizations.

In a powerful statement published as a full-page ad in The New York Times and signed by an impressive group of leading intellectuals and countless social activists across the country, the NION group opposed U.S. war everywhere and condemned police state restrictions on civil liberties and the detention and round-ups of immigrants based on religion and nationality. The spirited text was an important contribution to building a new movement where everyone is welcome and where the focus is on the real source of the problem, the United States.

A few weeks later, on Oct. 26, the International ANSWER group (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism) organized bi-coastal demonstrations that exceeded even the most optimistic estimates. Close to 100,000 mobilized in San Francisco and perhaps twice that number, simultaneously, in Washington, D.C.

The October actions brought into the streets what could only be considered a cross section of the American population, including a great majority for whom this was a first-time experience.

The NION and ANSWER actions were also endorsed and supported by a broad range of

organizations, including civil and human rights groups, social justice organizations, pacifist and faith-based groups, and a broad spectrum of environmental, anti-globalization and left groups and socialist parties. But other forces also added to the size of the mass assemblies, including a section of the ruling rich, who, for tactical reasons separate and apart from the interests of the new antiwar movement, are hesitant to join the rush to war. This explains why many corporate-controlled daily newspapers and TV news programs carried reports of the planned antiwar actions several days before they took place-which in turn helped to publicize and build the protests.

From Vietnam to Iraq

A review of the previous efforts in this country to build a mass movement against imperialist war can be instructive. Unfortunately, the tactics of the past are sometimes ritualized or reduced to formulas devoid of any relation to the present. On the other hand, there are important lessons to be learned.

A mass demonstration, for example, is an important tactic for protest that can be effectively employed under particular conditions. Properly used in the antiwar movement, the tactic can begin the process of the independent self-organization of the social forces that do have the power to stop imperialist war-that is, the working class and its close allies.

The mass protest actions during the Vietnam War-which grew in size to eventually include marches of hundreds of thousands in the streets-served to counter the government's claim to represent the majority of the population.

They provided a readily accessible vehicle for participation and gave confidence to millions who previously thought of themselves as powerless individuals instead

of being a vital and cohesive social force in society.

The mass actions, and especially in proportion to their size, exposed the lie that the war was fought in the interests of the American people. They provided the basis for alliances with other potent social forces, including those involved in the battle for civil rights in the United States, where legal segregation and racism were practiced with impunity.

Mass action is premised on the idea that progressive social change is the product of the independent self-organization of workers and all their allies among the oppressed and youth to achieve goals that reflect their own interests as opposed to the interests of the ruling rich. In short, history is made by the working masses employing a variety of tactics to wrest control of society in part or totally from the minority capitalist class, who appear to run society in everyone's interests.

While the vast majority of those who engage in mass protest are not conscious, at least initially, of challenging the system as a whole, the sense of empowerment generated by common action tends to deepen their understanding that the government does not represent their interests.

Mass action can pave the way to other tactics where working people more directly utilize their power in solidarity with the oppressed of other nations and in the fight for their interests at home. These include work stoppages and strikes, as well as the formation of a new mass political party, based on the power of a revitalized labor movement and its allies, as opposed to the parties of the ruling rich.

But mass strikes and similar direct challenges to capital are the music of the future. Today, the central problem faced by the new antiwar movement is to maximize

the numbers that can be brought into the streets in massive peaceful protest.

The term "peaceful" is not presented here accidentally. Mass participation at this juncture in U.S. political life is contingent on providing a vehicle open to everyone.

In contrast, advocates of "civil disobedience," who insist that more militant tactics are required to stop the war machine, tend to ignore the most fundamental aspect of building a mass movement. That is, they do not accept the premise that any successful movement must have a mass character and methods of struggle aimed at including the vast majority of the population. The arrest of a committed few, however well intentioned, is not a valid substitute for the direct involvement of millions and more.

This is not to say that the tactic of civil disobedience is without merit. At times when mass forces are engaged in actions where they have no choice but to defy unjust laws to insure their very survival, civil disobedience takes on a wholly different character.

Mass strikes in defiance of reactionary court injunctions, as may be the case as the ILWU battle unfolds, not to mention revolution itself, are without doubt bold acts of civil disobedience. These are premised on the involvement of mass forces as opposed to the substitution of the militant few for what must be the responsibility of the masses themselves. But again, however important, we are again venturing into the music of the future.

In every instance, the employment of tactics is determined by what is both required and possible. The combination is important. The mass actions during the Vietnam era, coupled with the radicalization of rank-and-file soldiers and combined with the courageous resistance of the Vietnamese

themselves, resulted in the first major defeat for American imperialism. Its capacity for further intervention anywhere was dealt a major blow. The space was opened wide for the emergence of new social movements.

Vietnam took place at a time of relative economic prosperity. It was a time when both "guns and butter," that is, war and improved living standards, were simultaneously achievable. Billions were spent in Vietnam while funds for public education tripled.

Today, however, the economic strength of the U.S. is on the wane. The present war drive takes place in the context of a massive drive against the living standards of American workers. Concessions to workers to stave off the coming radicalization are not within the reach of the corporate power. Consequently, U.S. workers can be expected to become involved in the new antiwar movement to a far greater degree than they were during the early years of the Vietnam War.

The issue of U.N. inspection

To the extent that any social movement relies on the institutions and political parties of the capitalist state to achieve its ends, it essentially accepts the legitimacy of a minority—that is, capitalist rule.

During the Vietnam War era this reliance was expressed in the slogan "Negotiate Now!" and in the related view, proposed by some forces, that an end to the U.S. war in Vietnam could best be achieved through the election of so-called peace candidates put forward by the Democratic Party.

Opponents of this orientation properly noted that the principle of self-determination of oppressed nations negated the right of the United States to negotiate by force of arms, or any other means, the future of Vietnam. Support for self-determination, from the

anti-colonial struggles of the 19th and 20th centuries to this day, demands a rejection of the right of oppressor nations to conquer and enslave other nations.

The political expression of support to the Vietnamese right to self-determination was expressed in the demand, "Bring the Troops Home Now!" or the shortened version, "Out Now!" In the initial stages of the struggle against the Vietnam War, proponents of this demand represented a small minority of the antiwar movement. The still prevailing fear generated by the McCarthyite anti-communist witch hunt (like today's "anti-terrorist" attacks on civil liberties), led many early participants to subordinate support to self-determination to indirect support to imperialist war aims.

They accepted the lie that the United States had rights in Vietnam. They gave credence to the ruling-class argument that the victory of so-called Vietnamese communism would result, domino style, in the victory of socialist revolution everywhere.

In effect, they defended the fundamental interests of American capitalism as opposed to the interests of the workers and peasants in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, who had spend some thousand years fighting to throw off the yoke of foreign conquerors—from the Chinese in ancient times to the French, Japanese, and Americans in the modern era.

As the war proceeded and additional millions entered the movement, advocates of the "Out Now!" demand became a majority. They argued effectively that the U.S. had no rights in Vietnam that the Vietnamese or anyone else were bound to respect.

Their position was bolstered as the horror of the U.S. war became clear to the American people—both in the form of coffins containing their sons killed in battle and in the truth that American soldiers brought home regarding the mass slaughter of

Vietnamese civilians. Furthermore, Black and Latino troops returned home from the racist war in Vietnam to face a racist society at home.

Proponents of "negotiations" argued, in contrast, that the election of liberal Democrats would facilitate negotiating an end to the Vietnam War. The Democratic Party fielded a series of "peace candidates" in an ultimately ineffectual attempt to demobilize and tame the antiwar movement. President Lyndon Johnson, who had been portrayed as the "peace candidate" against his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, was later driven from office by popular revulsion against his escalation of the Vietnam War.

His successor, Richard Nixon, was narrowly elected after he announced that he had a "secret plan" to end the war. Nixon, of course, went on to invade Cambodia and to decimate North Vietnam with unprecedented carpet bombing. Finally, after millions of people poured into the streets in protest, Nixon had no choice but to accede to the simple demand, "Out Now!" The alternative was to risk a deeper radicalization of the American people.

The debate over U.S. inspection

Today the question of the movement's class independence, and, therefore potential power, takes the form of the debate over raising demands that reject U.S. or any other form of imperialist intervention in Iraq. This includes the imperialist-created agency called the United Nations-which has served as a mask for U.S. armed interventions and wars, from Korea in the 1950s to the present day.

Those who demand "No U.S. War in Iraq!" or the several variations of this slogan, and include the United Nations along with the United States in their demand, have absorbed the best lessons of the Vietnam

War and stand politically poised to play a leading role in the coming mass movement. On the other hand, those who put forward demands for either U.S. or UN intervention or UN inspections essentially reject the right of self-determination of the Iraqi people.

Support to self-determination cannot be conditioned on one's views on the nature of the Iraqi regime and its leaders, including Saddam Hussein. It is not for the U.S. or any other nation to determine the nature of Iraq's government. "Nation building" is an imperialist concept employed to justify, supposedly in the name of "establishing democracy," the wars instigated by the world's real terrorists, the U.S. government and its rivals in other imperialist centers.

It was the U.S. that armed and financed the Hussein regime when it suited American capitalist interests. At that time, following the 1979 Iranian Revolution that removed the U.S.-imposed regime of the Shah of Iran, it was convenient and profitable for the U.S. to arm its Iraqi ally, including Hussein, for a 10-year war against Iran. Whatever weapons of mass destruction Hussein possessed were provided by the United States, the greatest purveyor of violence the world has ever known.

The fact that the Iranian people dared to think that they could control their own resources, especially their massive oil reserves, following the Shah's overthrow, was unacceptable to corporate America. One million people died in this U.S.-promoted war, 600,00 Iranians and 400,000 Iraqis.

Without the weapons and other support from U.S. and world imperialism to dictators around the world, the people of this earth would have removed their tyrants long ago. The people of Iraq and those of the rest of the world need no more colonialists dressed as liberators promising "regime changes" in the name of democracy.

The necessity of the united front

Organizational forms are subordinate to politics. Without principled political demands, such as we have discussed above, the form of organization chosen by the emerging mass movement is of little importance.

If millions of people, for example, were organized to demonstrate for UN inspections in Iraq, any organizational form chosen by the movement to bring out the masses would be negated. But once a movement has coalesced around principled demands, the method of organization becomes a critical question.

The experience of the Vietnam War during the 1960s and '70s and of the Central American anti-intervention movement in the 1980s and early '90s is instructive. At the early stages of both struggles decision-making tended to be in the hands of small groups who took it upon themselves to lead the movement without considering the merits of the broad involvement of broader forces with deep roots in American society.

The result was not only constant and unproductive "turf war" struggles between small groups but demonstrations that proved incapable of growing to involve the mass forces that were required.

As these movements developed, however, new methods of organization emerged, the most effective of which proved to be democratically organized mass national conferences, where the full range of the movement was present and decisions were made on the basis on one person, one vote.

These conferences, sometimes consisting of as many as 5000 activists, discussed and debated every aspect of the tasks ahead. They represented the full breadth of the social forces engaged in the struggle. They were based on the principle of non-

exclusion—that is, no one supporting the basic demands of the movement was excluded because of their political or organizational affiliation.

This was particularly important at a time when McCarthy-era exclusion and red-baiting still permeated sections of the antiwar movement, as it did the anti-nuclear weapons "peace movement" that preceded it. Everyone was now welcome—from communists and socialists, to faith-based groups, pacifists, feminist groups, and labor unions.

In short, the full range of forces were ready to unite for a single massive demonstration of the movement's power. When such antiwar conferences were convened, the real movement was, so to speak, in the room.

It was out of such mass democratic organizational forms that the most powerful antiwar demonstrations were called. All the old hassles that preceded this form of organization were put aside.

Arguments advocating delegated conferences based on one organization, one vote disappeared. There was no sense granting one vote to an organization that represented 100,000 people and an equal vote to a group that represented five. In truth, when this method of organization was employed, more often than not, the conference organizers and small groups were usually able to manipulate representation to serve their own interests.

In the end, the movement settled on mass conferences open to everyone. This usually meant that the great bulk of those present were new to the movement and broadly representative of all of its constituencies.

The challenge before the movement today is to develop such forms in which everyone is welcome. This, of course, requires the conscious collaboration and agreement of

the organizations that have already demonstrated their capacity to mobilize.

The stakes are high. As the present movement matures no single group, party, or organization, or even small combinations of them, can effectively maintain organizational control-not to mention effectively reaching out to the mass of new forces whose participation is a prerequisite to the construction of a powerful antiwar movement.

We must not engage in organizing strategies and tactics that unnecessarily and seriously weaken the movement. Inclusion means the democratic participation of everyone and a decision-making process that results in the highest level of unity possible around principled demands. This constitutes the fundamental underpinnings of a united-front-type organizational structure that has stood the test of time.

Participation in such a united front cannot be made contingent on agreement on a broad range of issues. The united front is an action formation, around a limited number of demands. It is not and cannot be the equivalent of a political party, whose positions on a wide range of issues constitute the basis for membership.

By definition, the united front requires agreement that all other issues be put aside. Faith-based groups cannot insist on the inclusion of their principles no more than socialist, feminist, and environmental groups can insist on theirs. This does not mean that every group and individual is not free to bring to the contemplated mass mobilization the ideas they choose in the form of placards, literature, and all the rest. It does mean that the political basis of the mobilization must be limited to the central issues at hand. At the same time, however, the broad range of groups involved can express their individual views as part of the rally program, where the movement's full

diversity is best expressed.

The antiwar movement has expended considerable energy in disputes over what demands to include as the basis for unity. There are no easy formulas to resolve this issue. It is clear, on the one hand, that the movement we are contemplating today is the struggle against U.S. intervention in Iraq. The addition of other demands should be determined first and foremost by whether or not they are both related to the war issue and whether they will help broaden participation.

In today's political climate, for instance, the inclusion of demands in defense of civil liberties and democratic rights can only expand the movement. And it is clear that false issues of national security and the war on terrorism that are used to justify war must be countered in the movement's literature.

Similarly, any war in the Middle East cannot be separated from the issue of Palestine. Intelligent ways to support demands for a free Palestine and oppose the U.S.-backed slaughter of the Palestinian people can also be found as the movement deliberates.

During the Vietnam War great efforts were made to channel the movement into the Democratic Party, a party that was properly called the "graveyard of social movements. Democratic Party supporters insisted not only on the demand for "negotiations" in Vietnam but also pressed for the inclusion of a wide range of issues whose content was vaguely stated so as to appear acceptable to liberal Democratic Party politicians.

The Democrats, fully aware of the power of the antiwar movement, constantly sought to coopt its leaders and ranks. The inclusion of vague multi-issue demands at several points in the movement's history temporarily facilitated the movement's decline.

Today, illusions in the Democratic Party as a force for social change are somewhat

diminished as more and more working people properly see the twin parties of capitalism as indistinguishable. Yet the reactionary record of the Republican Party administration toward social issues has been so flagrant that advice has come forth once again from some quarters that it will be necessary to "hold our nose" and campaign for Al Gore or some other "lesser evil" Democrat in the 2004 elections-as well as to "recapture" the House of Representatives for the Democrats.

The movement must be on constant guard against any attempt to demobilize it and to sidetrack its independent character in favor of Democratic Party campaigns.

As the ruling rich prepare for war, the coming months will witness a deepening of discussion and debate within the emerging antiwar movement. The decisions made regarding strategy and tactics may well prove to be critical to the movement's future and to the lives of countless thousands of the innocent Iraqi and Middle Eastern peoples.

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